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AUTHOR Rodriguez-Brown, Flora V.; Mulhern, Margaret M.

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ABSTRACT

A family literacy program for increasing 3- to 5-year-old children's literacy skills by educating their Mexican American parents is evaluated. Project Family Literacy--Aprendiendo, Mejorando, Educando ("Learning, Improving, Educating") (Project FLAME) is a federally funded program addressing Hispanic Americans' academic failure, characterized by high dropout rates and low scores on National Assessment of Educational Progress measures of reading proficiency, compared to White students. Project FLAME aims to increase parents' ability to assist their children's literacy learning and improve achievement in school reading and writing tasks. It addresses four elements of home literacy influence (literacy modeling, literacy opportunity, literacy interaction, and home-school relationships). Project FLAME was held at three elementary schools in an inner-city Spanish speaking neighborhood (98 percent Hispanic Americans). Data from case studies, interviews, and anecdotes were analyzed. The findings highlight examples of functional and critical behaviors revealed through home and school observations and discussed by parents in interviews. The results show that by addressing literacy on a functional level in a family literacy program, the participating parents gradually adopted more critical stances toward some institutions in their lives (including school). Included are 26 references. (RLC)

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Functional vs. Critical Literacy:
A Case Study in a Hispanic Community

Flora V. Rodriguez-Brown

Margaret M. Mulhern

University of Illinois at Chicago

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In recent years there has been an increased focus on teaching critical literacy rather than functional literacy. Critical literacy can be defined as a set of actions which acknowledge participants knowledge and promote democratic change. As such, critical literacy is not seen as the development of skills but as an integral part of people's lives, whereby people "produce, transform and reproduce meaning" (Freire and Macedo, 1987, p.142). In general, functional literacy emphasizes meeting the everyday needs of individuals in order to function in our society. Definitions usually include miminal levels of proficiency such as grade levels or basic competencies (Sharon, 1973; Kirsch & Guthrie, 1977). In this paper we argue that by addressing literacy on a functional level in a family literacy program the participating parents gradually adopted more critical stances toward some institutions in their lives (including school). Additionally, parents eventually took actions allowing them to begin to reconstruct their worlds.

The family literacy program discussed here aimed at increasing the literacy skills of 3-5 years old by educating their Mexican-American parents. The program will be described briefly below followed by a discussion of our use of the terms functional and critical literacy. Our understanding of these terms has been shaped within the context of the literacy program, our daily work with the parents, and the data collected. The findings will highlight examples of functional and critical behaviors revealed through home and school observations and discussed by parents in

interviews. Finally, conclusions will be drawn and the issue of parent education will be discussed.

Description of the Project

Project FLAME (1) (Family Literacy - Aprendiendo, Mejorando, Educando {Learning, Improving, Educating}) is a U.S. government funded program directed by two professors at a University in a large urban area. The program was designed to address the problem of academic failure for Hispanics, characterized by high drop out rates and low scores on NAEP measures of reading proficiency as compared to Anglos (Applebee, Langer & Mullis, 1987; NCLR, 1991). Because school efforts to alleviate the disparity between mainstream and minority students have been only partially effective, this program was designed to go beyond the school efforts and into the homes of the families in order to attempt to equalize children's literacy opportunity when they enter school.

Literacy learning is a culturally-bound activity, highly influenced by home and community factors. The literacy culture in Hispanic homes is likely to differ from that of the school which is based on middle class patterns of interaction. Mexican-immigrant parents have not been schooled in the U.S. and often have limited English proficiency. Therefore, they are less likely to have appropriate sociocultural knowledge of school expectations (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). Additionally, some research has indicated that Hispanic families are less likely to engage in shared book reading (Goldenberg and Gallimore, 1991; Teale, 1986), an activity

which positively contributes to literacy development by allowing opportunities for meaningful exchange about texts (Teale, 1984).

Home-school differences in communication style, views of literacy, and the nature of literacy interactions are often different. Rather than supporting each other, they may interfere with the literacy development of children. Project FLAME was developed to help diminish dissimilarities between home and school experiences that affect children's academic performance. The aims of the program include: increasing parents' ability to assist their children's literacy learning, increasing parent's confidence in their ability to do so, and improved achievement in school reading and writing tasks for their 3-5 year old children who are the focus of the program (Rodriguez-Brown, & Shanahan, 1989). The design of the program addresses four elements of home literacy influence which are described below: literacy modeling, literacy opportunity, literacy interaction, and home-school relationships.

The first component, literacy modeling, aims at increasing the availability and salience of literacy models for children. This component includes community literacy sessions in which parents are encouraged to find ways of drawing children's attention to literacy during daily activities. Parents also become literacy models through their attendance at ESL classes and are encouraged to model their use of literacy at home to their children in Spanish or English.

Literacy opportunity refers to the amount and type of literacy material in the home. In sessions addressing this aspect of

literacy, the program teaches parents how to increase the availability of literacy materials to their children. The themes of these sessions are: book selection, distribution of literacy boxes and creation of home literacy centers, authoring books with children, visiting the library, and two books fairs where parents are given coupons to buy books for their children.

The literacy interaction component is designed to give parents information and techniques that would better enable them to engage in literacy activities with their children. These sessions include: shared-book reading, language games, language experience approach, teaching letters and sounds, and emergent writing.

The final element addressed in the literacy sessions is home-school relationships. These sessions give parents the opportunity to meet with teachers in order to share their concerns and to learn about American schools and teachers' expectations. Parents also make classroom visits in order to see the kinds of activities in which children engage in school.

Parental participation in the program is voluntary and participants are recruited through three elementary schools and community liaisons. Literacy sessions such as those described above are held every other week from October to May. Children participate in these sessions with their parents as parents try out the ideas presented. ESL classes for the parents are held twice a week throughout the year. During the summer a Parent Leadership Institute is held at the university and parents participate in workshops led by community leaders or educators. The teachers in

the program are graduate and undergraduate students at the university majoring in bilingual or ESL education.

Critical versus Functional Literacy

In formulating definitions of critical and functional literacy we looked at how changes took place in literacy over the course of the program. Our conception of literacy has been influenced by the work of Freire, Macedo, and Giroux (Macedo & Freire, 1987). Definitions of literacy are problematic as some choose to define it as reading and writing at a certain level and others view literacy more broadly, including oral forms of literacy. Researchers have demonstrated that oral and written forms of literacy are on a continuum rather than dichotomous (Shuman, 1986; Tannen, 1985 Heath, 1982). Our work with the Mexican parents involved in the project has led us to believe that literacy should be conceived broadly rather than narrowly. Therefore, our use of the term literacy will not only refer to written literacy but oral literacy and critical actions as well.

Given this broad definition of literacy, we agree with Giroux (Freire & Macedo, 1987) that, "to be literate is not to be free, it is to be present and active in the struggle for reclaiming one's voice, history, and future" (p. 11). A theory of critical literacy, then, needs to develop out of pedagogical practices where people are able to make sense out of their own lives. Teacher and students together have to recover their voices and be able to compare what they have lived with what they have been told.

Functional literacy is defined in the context of our project as that which the parents feel is necessary in order to facilitate daily oral and written communication in English and Spanish. This includes increasing their potential for obtaining jobs, but more significantly, negotiating their daily worlds: communicating with medical personnel, teachers, and their own children. For example, while the mothers wanted to improve their English in order to be able to assist their children with homework, they also realized that they needed to improve their basic literacy and computational skills in order to do this. The directors had also begun the program with an emphasis on functional literacy because they hoped to guide parents in preparing their children to succeed in school.

According to Freire and Macedo (1987), "literacy becomes a meaningful construct to the degree it is viewed as a set of practices that functions to either empower or disempower people" (p. 141). In project FLAME, parents' learning was not limited to increasing their skills although this in itself was empowering. Rather, they found that writing and speaking about their experiences led to changes in their relationships with the wider society. In other words, functional literacy developed into a set of cultural practices that promoted emancipatory changes in their lives. For example, they became aware of ways in which they could address their lack of power in the schools. We agree with Giroux (Freire & Macedo,1987) when he states that, "the issue of literacy and power does not begin and end with the process of learning how to read and write critically: instead, it begins with the fact

that one's existence is part of a historically constructed practice within specific relations of power" (p.7). From Giroux's perspective then, the adults in this program were able to realize not only how they "actively construct their own experiences within ongoing relations of power, but also how the social construction of such experiences provides them with the opportunity to give meaning and expression to their own needs and voices as part of a project of self and social empowerment" (Freire and Macedo, 1987, p.7).

Methodology

Participants and Setting:

The program was held at three elementary schools in an inner-city Spanish speaking neighborhood (98% Hispanic, mostly of Mexican origin). The students at the participating elementary schools come from low-income families and because the community is heavily populated the schools are over-crowded. Additionally, gang activity, crime and unemployment are high. With the exception of a few fathers the participants were mothers with an average education of 7 years.

Data Collection and Analysis

Assessment of the program for the first two years has been conducted by an outside evaluator using data collected from beginning and end-of-year interviews, and pre and post test data on children's literacy skills. In addition to these instruments it was decided that qualitative data should be collected in order to

document how parents were putting into practice at home the knowledge gained from the literacy sessions. To this end, three families from one of the participating schools were chosen for more in-depth case studies. The case studies involved several visits to the families' homes, interviews with parents, and audio-recordings of parents sharing books with their children.

Interviews of parents were another data source. Parents were interviewed at the beginning of the year and provided demographic data and some information about home literacy uses. End-of-year interviews provided information on knowledge parents gained from the program and their perceptions of their role in their families and the community. Interviews were carried out in Spanish and subsequently translated into English. Later, they were analized and categorized by their content as it applied to the different components in project FLAME's design. The final source of data was anecdotes and fieldnotes collected by the Project staff involved in the program. These notes proved to be a rich source of evidence of critical literacy functioning among the parents.

Compiling the various sources of data, patterns which had emerged from the case studies were compared to parents' responses to interview questions and staff notes on significant changes seen. The data indicated that the original goals of the program were achieved in the areas of literacy modeling, literacy opportunity, literacy interaction, and home-school relationships. It also revealed that the families involved in the program are using the knowledge and skills learned in Project FLAME more critically than

we had originally intended. The expected and unexpected outcomes of the project will be detailed here.

Looking at functional and critical literacy in action: A discussion of findings

Literacy modeling, or the extent to which parents used literacy at home and modeled the uses of literacy to their children, varied. The three case studies revealed that the parents who had the highest levels of formal education used literacy more frequently and for a wider range of uses than the other two families where the functional uses of literacy were most apparent. Parents modeled to their children the importance of education by attending ESL classes.

Several mothers said in interviews that their role in helping children to read was to set an example for their children by reading and writing. Berta, one of the participating mothers, said, "I should read and write in front of my children, so that they will do the same. In other words, to set an example so that they can follow." Parents believed that they could motivate their children to read by displaying their own interest in literacy. Lorena H. told us, "We as parents need to motivate our children to read and we should be an example of this reading ourselves."

In the category of literacy opportunity, the case studies demonstrate that the accessibility of literacy materials seemed to make some difference in the amount of time children engaged in literacy activities. In the homes of two children where books and

writing materials were always in view, they (and their younger siblings) engaged frequently in book reading and writing. However, in another home where books were kept in a bedroom the child did not use the materials during any home visits. Teachers in the program also mentioned a marked difference over the course of the year in other parents' attitudes towards allowing children to handle books. Observations in the homes of non-participants revealed that parents often do not have books because children cannot read or they fear younger children will destroy the books.

Two of the three focal families reported that they visited the library and in one home several library books were always in the living room. One mother did not go to the library on her own, although she was excited about taking out books based on her children's interests during a class library visit. According to the teachers in the program, not all the families go to the library on a regular basis. Some parents mentioned reading library books to children while others read their children books obtained through the program.

Isabel R. said, "They (the parents) ought to be teachers and friends so that children don't look at reading as a chore, but as FUN. Parents should take kids to the library; they should have and share books with the family. Parents ought to help kids write and write themselves to help the reading process; make pictures, work together." The parents' self-report of literacy activities discussed in the program evaluation for the school year 90-91 show that since they started participating in the program, over 60% of

the families report to be more conscious of having crayons, paper, pencils and printed materials of different kinds and in Spanish and English at home. Also, over 50% of the families report that they use the community (public library, supermarket, museums, parks) to enhance the literacy experiences for the family.

In the category of literacy interaction the data revealed that the children were being read to at home. This finding is significant because of the limited amount of reading found in other studies of Hispanics (Anderson & Stokes, 1984; Gallimore & Goldenberg, 1989; Teale, 1986) and because of the widespread agreement that being read to allows children to learn about written language (Holdaway, 1979; Teale, 1984; Wells, 1986).

When asked to share a book with their child, the parents in the case studies demonstrated similar ways of reading to children which were appropriate to the children's ability levels asking both comprehension and labeling questions and answering children's questions.

In interviews, all the parents said that one of the most important things they learned in the program was how to share books with their children. Parents' self-reports revealed that they share books with their children variably, from once a week to daily. These interactions are initiated by both children and their parents and siblings, with mothers reading most frequently. The following responses were typical of those the parents gave at the end of the year about how they shared books in their families.

Margarita J. reported:

"I read with them everyday because I enjoy it. However, my children look through and 'read' their books all day long. They like to look at the books they choose at the book fair and they're always after me to read them with them. We talk about the pictures in the books and they always ask a lot of questions, too many, I would say."

Isabel R. told us:

"We read everyday in the living room, in the afternoon. I read short children's stories from the library, our own (over and over). We read round-robin, and even though my son doesn't read, he 'reads' from pictures and memory and imagination. My husband reads, too. I initiate-we have a regular schedule. We (me and my husband) ask prediction questions and inferential questions. We sometimes don't read the conclusion until we all imagine and tell our own."

Additionally, all three children engaged in pretend reading, or reading re-enactments, an activity which allows children to reconstruct written text (Holdaway, 1979; Pappas & Brown, 1988). Two of the children also engaged in other reading-like behaviors which are considered learning to read strategies (Doake, 1985). Other types of literacy interactions taking place in homes include teaching the ABC's, writing stories with children, and playing games.

Writing is another aspect of literacy interaction. Parents retained many of their traditional beliefs about writing, that is, one needs to learn how to make letters correctly before one can write. This was especially evident when parents gave children words or letters to copy. However, two mothers in the case studies also accepted their children's nonconventional writing as meaningful and one mentioned that she learned this from the FLAME program. Of the three children observed at home, one engaged in

writing more frequently and was not concerned about "correct" writing since her mother accepted her emergent writing. In interviews few parents mentioned writing as a way of helping children learn to read. We have tried to give more attention to children's writing in the literacy sessions because parents did not often engage in purposeful writing activities with their children.

Some parents also learned that it is important to talk with their children. One mother said that books had helped stimulate dialogue between her and her son. Rosa L. said:

"I feel I know how to help them (my children) better now. For example, when one of my children comes home in a bad mood or feeling down I remember what we've been told, to talk to them and find out what's wrong. Before I would yell at them but now I know by talking to them I can help them more."

Rosa has realized that this is a more effective strategy than the behaviors she used before participating in Project FLAME.

The interviews and anecdotal notes revealed many changes in parents' home-school relationships. Parents consider themselves as having a fundamental role in their children's education. They feel they now know how to support teacher's efforts and work with them. Parents realized that they can have an impact on their children's education by reinforcing what children learn in school and learning about what is happening in the school. On the question as to whether the home and the school have a role in learning to read and write parents' responses demonstrated that they believe they have a central role in their children's education. Iris believes, "Both places help each other. Reading and writing at home help the child in school and vice-versa." Isabel learned that, "The school and

home both have the responsibility to teach them (children) to read and most of all to facilitate the comprehension of what they read. Because we know our children, we can inspire them by giving life to books."

Parents learned to pay more attention to the instruction their children were receiving in school, reported changes in their children's enjoyment of reading, and claimed they have better relationships with their children's teachers. Leticia G. spoke about this change. "What I learn to do in the program FLAME I do with them (the children) and then they know more. I'm glad I joined this program, because with my oldest child I didn't know all this and even though I tried to help him in school I didn't feel I could. Now I feel I can help my children." Irma Z. commented, "Now we have a better idea of how to support teachers' efforts and work with them. It's not a matter of just dropping them off in the morning and that's it. One must know what's going on. One must work with children at home."

Teachers of the children in the program have mentioned that the participating parents are more active in the school. This is evident not only in their participation of school events but their willingness to serve as members of local school councils (LSC). Recently, three FLAME parents became candidates for the local school councils in their children's schools. They ran their own campaigns and were elected by public vote. They are able to express their own views about schools and have a voice in their children's education. FLAME parents also changed their attitudes

about going to school council meetings. One mother reported, "We feel powerful when we come to school meetings, we sit together, we feel useful."

In interviews, parents referred not only to what they had learned from teachers but also to the ways in which their children and classmates helped them. One mother said that the program opened her mind as she learned ideas from her classmates and the teacher. Maria S. said, "I liked what we learned and the strength of the enthusiasm of the teachers. Being able to interact with the other students and learn from them." Lorena H., "liked the patience that the teachers had in explaining things and the companionship between the teacher and the students." Parents were able to make friendships, share ideas and food, and enjoy dialogue in classes among the students.

Parents felt that the information and experiences gained in the program could not have been obtained on their own. Previous lack of information made school difficult for their older children. The information parents gained extended beyond specific literacy skills. One of the University staff members noted that during one local school council meetings where uniform policy was being discussed, the FLAME parents were the most active participants in the discussion. This assertive behavior contrasted with their reticence evident at the beginning of the program.

Asked about what the family had learned through FLAME, Margarita L. answered:

"I have learned more English. I have learned to help my children learn to read. Now I know how important it is, because now my son LIKES to read, before he didn't. I know more about discipline and child rearing. I have a good relationship with the school teachers."

Margarita J. said:

"My family has become more united as a result. My husband has witnessed what a change spending more time with his children can have. He has changed and really enjoys his sons more now. I have learned how valuable it is to share ideas and be part of the group. My children now have a more responsive father who is more interested in what they learn, in what I learn."

These answers show that at this stage, the effects of the project go beyond the functional aspects of literacy originally included in the program. The program has been effective because it has brought together parents who would otherwise have been more isolated. Parents are more willing to dialogue and to participate in the school.

The data reveal what they have learned through FLAME and how this learning has affected their life at home, their view of schools, and their role as parents. This is not functional literacy but critical literacy at work. Parents have validated their knowledge and potential and can express more openly their desires and dreams. They have taken ownership of the program. The project staff is there to share experiences, support their ideas and dialogue.

Some specific examples of situations where functional literacy activities triggered critical literacy will clarify our view of this change. These examples dealt with reading and writing as well as oral language. The first occurred during a session on songs and

rhymes when parents started singing and playing childhood games. They enjoyed the activity so much that they decided that children should know about their families' pasts. They discussed recording or writing their family histories for their children. During the discussion they were full of pride, realizing that knowledge of their past was important to their children.

The second example took place during a workshop given by a children's book author. One of the parents had read a book by the author and did not agree with the way the author dealt with anger. After the presentation, that parent had a discussion with the author, who they recognized that cultural differences may affect the way children react to the book. The parent was willing to share her opinion and knowledge and the dialogue validated her knowledge.

The third incident occurred while discussing the topic of absenteeism to ESL classes. It became clear that parents miss classes for a common reason: they are not able to make appointments on their free days at a health clinic in the neighborhood but must go on days when classes are scheduled. The discussion led to issues regarding the way they were treated by personnel at the clinic. The parents decided to write a letter expressing their complaints to the director of the clinic.

It is difficult to say exactly what triggered the changes to critical literacy in these situations. We know that the parents feel they have been empowered. Their empowerment comes from the realization that they have knowledge and that validating that

knowledge has made it more visible.

Conclusion

The findings presented here show the ways in which parents are using the knowledge they have gained in FLAME classes at home and in the community. The case studies, interviews and anecdotal evidence demonstrate that FLAME has had an impact on the availability of literacy materials in the home and that the materials are being used effectively. Parents are aware of the importance of reading to children and both parents and children enjoy reading together. They have enhanced their home-school relationships by learning more about schools and how they can effectively work with teachers to help their children's education. Increasing their ability to communicate in English has increased their confidence and enabled them to meet their needs independently. They have assumed more active roles in the schools and are beginning to question the status quo in their communities.

For Freire, literacy is part of the process of becoming self-critical about the historically constructed nature of one's experience. In this program, we feel parents were able to name their experiences or "read" the world because they gained the knowledge and skills necessary to see their experiences contrasted with the American culture they now live in and find affecting their lives.

Project FLAME, the family literacy program in which such change took place, can easily be considered parent-training, often

criticized because it aims at bringing minority groups into mainstream ways of using literacy and behavor. However, such arguments ignore the voices of those served in such programs who realize that their dreams of educational success and increased educational opportunity for their children will not be achieved without access to learning the dominant language and sociocultural knowledge of negotiating new systems, in particular, schools in the U.S. Parents in Project FLAME are not interested in giving up their own traditions, language, and values, yet they realize that they cannot negotiate the dominant culture without learning about it. According to Macedo, people "have to become literate about their histories experiences and the culture of their immediate environments... They must also appropriate those codes and cultures of the dominant spheres so that they can transcend their own environments" (Freire and Macedo, 1987 p.47). From our experience we know that parents voluntarily participated in the program and repeatedly requested information which would allow them to access middle-class success, realizing that they are currently handicapped by their lack of linguistic ability and sociocultural knowledge. It is only by gaining the confidence and ability to negotiate a new culture that people can be empowered to make changes in their lives and community.

The writing in English from one of the mothers in the project beautifully illustrates how she read her world of childhood and has carried it over to her dreams for the future:

> "Sometimes I remember my personal story, when I was a girl climbing a tree and I use to remember the tales that my grandmother told me at night about princes and princesses whit(sic) big castles. I throught(sic) at that moment I was the princess of the story, all the panorama that was around me was lovely, the tree was my castle, and the flowers I was watching, the white margaritas and the red roses, and all the others were the flowers that my eyes had ever saw until now. And I think my spirit of a little gril(sic) is with me, and I am still living a story because when I came to the city I like to read and see the magazines of fashion and dream of having the things that rich people have" (Bernarda, 1990).

In remembering her childhood and sharing her dreams with the reader, Bernanda let you know that there is nothing wrong with dreaming. Dreams can become reality.

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